

## 翻译研究

## Classical Chinese Novels in Hungarian Translation

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**Abstract:** In the socialist period (1957–1989), Hungary experienced the golden age of translation: non-profit state-owned publishing houses could finance long-term translation projects, producing good books due to their reliable editing staff and good translators. Three of the four classical Chinese novels and *Jin Ping Mei* were translated in that period into Hungarian, although only the *Water Margin* (1961) and the *Journey to the West* (1969) were translated directly from Chinese by a leading sinologist, while the *Dream of the Red Chamber* (1959) and *Jin Ping Mei* (1964) indirectly from abridged German translations. However, those indirect translations were the bigger hits, published and sold in several consecutive editions possibly because the two-step domestication of the text's foreignness solicited more active response from the Hungarian readers, or those family stories seemed more like western novels and more accessible. The situation of Chinese translations has dramatically deteriorated after 1989, but let us hope for its improvement.

**Key words:** direct translation; indirect translation; classical Chinese novel; Hungarian tradition of translation; Mo Yan

**摘要:** 社会主义时期(1957–1989)的匈牙利迎来了翻译的黄金时代:不以盈利为目的的国有出版社能够赞助长期的翻译项目,并因拥有可靠的编辑人员和众多优秀的译者而生产佳作。在此期间,《金瓶梅》和中国古典小说四大名著中的三部被译为匈牙利语,不过,其中只有《水浒传》(1961)和《西游记》(1969)是由一位杰出的汉学家直接从中文译入的,而《红楼梦》(1959)和《金瓶梅》(1964)均转译自德文删简版。然而,那些转译的作品却更受欢迎,不断再版。究其原因,也许是原作的异国因素在经过转译后,更易引起匈牙利读者的共鸣,但也可能是因为家族题材的小说与西方小说更为相类,更易为本土读者所接受。1989年之后匈牙利对中国文学的翻译急剧减少,此种状况今后或许会有改善。

**关键词:** 直译; 转译; 中国古典小说; 匈牙利的翻译传统; 莫言

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The Socialist period seems to have been the golden age of literary trans-

lation, especially prose translation in Hungary [1:26]. Not the first couple of years with a rather orthodox Stalinist regime, which forbade not only translation and publication, but also library reading of every author who lived or had lived in countries running capitalist economic system that time. The extreme censorship actually killed Hungarian culture for about 6 years. From appr. 1954, but definitely after 1956 to 1990, however, the regime tried to finance the communist enlightenment program of culture. Translations were regarded as a means of educating the masses. It was an ideologically based and therefore state sponsored activity of the publishing houses to make all the important works of world literature (supposed they did not evidently present unacceptable ideologies) available to the working masses. They had time, staff, and resources for that. Since publishers were not market oriented, they could invest many years in a project without any need of fast (or any) return. They also had a relatively reliable staff of editors and correctors, since political counter-selection did less harm on that rather low level of the intelligentsia. Publishing houses also had money, and translation payed relatively well. Relatively, since we are speaking of a period when nobody was really well paid.

The situation was also rather fortunate (at least from the viewpoint of translations) in labor supply. Many of the most talented prose writers were treated as suspicious persons by the communist party. Those writers were rarely allowed to publish their works or to have any job connected with the written culture. But they were allowed to translate to make their living. Géza Ottlik, a towering figure of modern Hungarian prose, had to learn English in order to be able to translate Dickens, because it was the only activity with which he could avoid starvation [2:257–260]. As a result we have excellent Dickens translations on the level of the best contemporary Hungarian prose. I have to admit that some scholars tend to criticize Ottlik's translations because of frequent inaccuracies, which is hardly a surprise, since he actually was learning English while translating Dickens, and others have the suspicion that the real translator was actually Ottlik's wife, since she knew English. Be it as it may: from the viewpoint of a target oriented approach to translations they are excellent, since the quality of the target text is rather high.

This example is not at all exceptional. Many great Hungarian intellectuals preferred translation to writing original books, since it was a safe activity. The representatives of the publishing houses took the risk both for the selection of works to be translated and for the publication. A translator just created texts as

good as their talent allowed, and took the money. Writing essays or academic books was riskier: one could become the target of political attacks for his or her ideas, while there was nothing to win, since people did not need to publish anything to keep their jobs. And the situation was the same everywhere in Eastern-Europe: classical scholars for example rarely published books during the socialist period, but they translated a lot. With this said we arrived at the third aspect of the golden age of translations: the influence of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the humanities or scholarship in general. The Academy, in cooperation with the publishers, of course, developed plans of what should be translated. Such lists contained socialist versions of the canon of world literature, and scholars had to find reasons to include something in a list that could convince party authorities, but once that was done, a piece of literature very probably had everything to get translated: a good translator, time, money, editing staff.

It is hardly a surprise in such circumstances that the prestige of translation is relatively high even now in East-Europe, although the situation of translators has change immensely, and unfavorably. We should not mind that there is no central planning for translations, since it also meant that if a work was not included in the central plan, it could easily be regarded as forbidden. But there are no state owned publishers any more, and business enterprises always try to cut the costs (paying less to the translators and not employing text editors) and to have as fast return as possible (forcing translators to work with short deadlines). Talented intellectuals may have better occupations, like writing their own books, but there are still many good translators on the market — having strong competition with even many more fast-working, untalented, cheap ones. I saw the example of Petra Gizella Szabó, who was an excellent, bilingual translator of German texts into Hungarian and vice versa. She always produced high quality texts, but she translated slowly and carefully. No publishing house tolerated that after 1990, and she actually could not make a living as a translator; previously she more or less could.

The changes did the most harm to such literary works that need really long time to be translated: like epic poetry and very long novels. Intellectuals frequently express wishes for new translations of important classic poetry or voluminous novels, but such translations need probably years, while nobody will pay the translator a penny. Who can afford to do this? To work on a

translation project for years while one has to support themselves from something else? As a counterexample I would like to refer to the example of Zsuzsa Rakovszky, a good poet who nowadays, in a rather late phase of her career became an excellent prose writer. Since 1986 she has made her living as a freelance translator of English texts. In 2008–2009 it was she who translated Stephanie Meyer's *Twilight* trilogy. On the one hand, she could translate very fast, since the English text is rather plain and simplistic, and then get paid; on the other hand, she wrote a much better text than the source text was, since however fast she worked, a first rank prose writer rewrote a best seller. It was possible due to the still high prestige of literary translation and the pressure of free market. Nevertheless we cannot help feeling it is a waste of talent; a good writer, when translating, should rather invest her energies in first rank texts.

I suppose this introduction to the context was necessary to show what happened with the classical Chinese novels in Hungary. Since those are quite long texts, they do not really seem to have a chance to get translated nowadays, but it is just logical that Socialist publishers had put it on their agenda to make them available to the working masses, since they were regarded as part of the world literature canon. An important Hungarian sinologist, Barnabás Csongor provided the translation of two of the four classical novels, namely *Water Margin* in 1961 [3], and the *Journey to the West* in 1969 [4]. We can say that he used to be an important sinologist, since he was the chair of Hungary's single Department of Chinese in Budapest for twenty years (1963–1983). He published important papers, but he never wrote a book. Just like I told earlier about the typical achievement of East-European intellectuals in the socialist era; probably the most important part of his output was his translations. He translated Chinese poetry and minor prose works too, but two such great translation project are also enough to respect him. And actually he did not finish the scholarly care about those novels with the publication. The 1977 second edition of *Water Margin* indicates it is an “extended edition” [5], although nothing indicated in the first one that it was abridged. The fact itself that the first edition appeared in two while the second in three volumes does not necessarily mean that the latter has a longer text. He also revised his essay included: the first edition contained a foreword entitled “On the *Water Margin*,” while in the second a paper followed the translation with the title “Chinese Novel — Chinese Society.” For the 1980 second edition of



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the *Journey to the West* he not only wrote a commentary[6], but he also provided the brand new translation of Dong Yue's *A Supplement to the Journey to the West*[7], which — due to the same format and design — appeared as if being the third volume of the novel. Apart from that Barnabás Csongor mostly stopped translating in the later phase of his career.

These good, reliable, complete translations (with its slight but elegant archaisms), made by an expert of Chinese language and culture meet the standards of the generally canonized requirements of literary translations in Hungary. The rest of classical Chinese novels did not have such a favorable fate. Both the *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Jin Ping Mei* have been translated from abridged German translations. The basis of the former was Franz Kuhn's 1932 Leipzig translation, which hardly contained the half of the original length. The Hungarian version was sold in five editions (1959, 1962, 1964, 1975, 1988), and one of them was published in Bucharest, Romania, to provide a good read to the Hungarian minority of 1,5 million people living there. In 1983, when the Hungarian Academy of Sciences and the Budapest University organized a conference on sinology, entitled "China's culture in Hungary," an exhibition of books was also installed. The published conference proceedings contained a paper describing that exhibition too, in which Mária Ferenczy felt obliged to explain why some books not translated directly from Chinese were also displayed. The public was so interested in some classical Chinese novels "that I was necessary to make them available much earlier than translations from the original could have been completed. It was worth doing so: for example the *Dream of the Red Chamber* has been sold at least in four edition, while its translation from Chinese is still in a preparatory stage." [8:84] This "preparatory stage" does not probably mean more than some persons were talking about how nice it would be to translate the whole novels from Chinese. It, however, was not going to happen: five years later the same old translation was republished, and the *Dream of the Red Chamber* has not been either re-translated or even re-published since 1988. I understand that it is faster to translate a shorter version of the novel, but Ferenczy seems to suggest that translating from Chinese is generally a slower business than from German. If a sinologist says so, it is difficult to deny, but we may have our doubts. I find it probable that the utterance implies that an academic scholar translates slower (because more carefully) than a professional translator.

*Jin Ping Mei* has also been translated from a German version by Franz Kuhn, which was abridged and shy, entitled *Kin Ping Meh, oder Die abenteuerliche Geschichte von Hsi Men und Seinen sechs Frauen* [9]. The explanation-like German subtitle means “The adventurous story of Hsi Men and his six wives”, and this was the title of the 1939 English translation by Bernard Miall, who also translated the Franz Kuhn version [10]. And that German book was also translated into French in 1949 [11]. Let me summarize the situation: when the Hungarian publishers decided to publish a Hungarian *Jin Ping Mei*, the general European approach was to get Franz Kuhn’s text as the source. If they did not have someone who could translate from Chinese (since the only suitable person was working on the *Journey to the West*), it could have been really hard to find a complete western translation. The fifth volume of the first complete German translation did not appear earlier than in 1983 [12], the French in 1985 [13]. There was an available complete translation in mostly English, which, however, was purged in a way that some explicitly sexual passages were rendered in Latin [14]. The first completely English complete translation appeared in 2006 [15]. Therefore it is relatively acceptable that the 1964 first Hungarian translation was based on Franz Kuhn’s German version. What is rather problematic is the lack of any further step towards a complete translation made from the Chinese original. This lack of interest may have been caused by the tremendous success of the first translation, which was published in 7 editions by 5 publishers in two countries. It was the only classical Chinese novel which was republished even after 1990. Earlier a theater adaptation was staged with excellent actors in one of the biggest theaters of Budapest in 1984, and a radio-play series adaptation entertained listeners for several months.

Before getting to some conclusions, let us shortly describe the situation with *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*. As it seems, the Publishing House Európa was interested in the publication of its full translation made from the Chinese original. That particular publisher was responsible for the publication of world literature in Hungarian translation, and despite the name, which it was given in 1957, its activity was by no means limited to European or even western literature. It had great series like “The Classics of World Literature,” which tried to subsume all the canonized works of the world, and “Modern Library,” which selected contemporary writers from all the five continents. It was probably also important that Ferenc Túkei, an influential sinologist and

also a committed (and in some phases of his career rather powerful) communist, when he had some minor disagreement with the Socialist Party after 1956, was fired from the East Asia Museum and worked for Európa Publishers as an editor between 1957–1967. He seems to have pushed the Európa to publish all the classical Chinese novels. In the late 1960s a young sinologist, Ildikó Ecsedy submitted a sample, which might make the publishers possible to decide if they want to publish *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*. She translated chapters 1–6, appr. 5% of the full text, but the publishing house turned the offered project down. This is the only classical Chinese novel Európa has not published in any form, and Ildikó Ecsedy did not continue translating it. In 1987, however, she published that sample, and in the “translator’s note” she wrote: “Almost two decades ago, when starting my career I thought that I will have the time for such a huge project among all other obligations, I wanted to translate the whole work.” She thought that at the turn of 1969–1970 “it could have been partly caused by the geopolitical situation that the publishers did not react to that initiative.” [16:76] The sample was published by the Workshop for Oriental Studies of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, a research group Ecsedy was that time working for. It was a scholarly publication, which was not meant for the wider public. It had a second edition by Balassi, one of the major academic publishers, in 1997. We see that the manuscript translation fragment of a young scholar (meant for the widest reading public) had a revival as scholarly achievement when she was at the peak of her career and influence. The suggestion that the translation is an academic achievement is strengthened by the fact that none of the two editions indicates the name of the Chinese author on the cover, only that of the translator. It is rather exceptional in Hungarian publishing practice: usually the author is indicated on the cover, while the translator is not. In this book, however, the author is indicated only third page in the form a sort of subtitle: *The Romance of Three Kingdoms: Six Chapters from Luo Guanzhong’s Novel* [17:3].

From publication and sales data we can conclude that the Hungarian public was much more interested in shorter versions of classical Chinese novels that were translated directly from German, and only indirectly from Chinese. Why was it so? It is possible that the radical strangeness of the represented ancient Chinese world somehow deterred the Hungarian audience, and texts that were domesticated in two steps were more consumable. Franz Kuhn made

the Chinese novels accessible for European readers not only by transposing them into a major European language, but also by cutting out long parts and rendering them in a kind of harmony with modern European expectations on novel-reading. Then Hungarian translators, who did not know Chinese, domesticated the texts even further, without the temptation of re-sinicizing. It is also possible that those two novels, *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Jin Ping Mei* were already more similar to western novels (family stories, after all, with grand social-historical tableaux in the background), which similarity might have been strengthened by the German translation.

This, however, cannot be the whole explanation. Ferenc Tőkei is indicated as having checked the translation of *Jin Ping Mei*, and he also provided interpreting essays for both *Dream of the Red Chamber* and *Jin Ping Mei*. The Hungarian texts do not seem really domesticating the strange content. Let us take two examples. The Hungarian translation of *Dream of the Red Chamber* applies Chinese addresses as *tai tai* or *mei mei*, and offers a short dictionary for such Chinese terms at the very beginning. The second example for not-domesticating strategies is the title of *Jin Ping Mei*. The Hungarian translation did not repeat the double title by Franz Kuhn; it translated the original Chinese in a way of explaining its metaphor: “Beautiful women in a rich house.” Maybe explaining it away, but definitely offering a title which is, as a title of a novel, completely strange in the western or Hungarian context. Despite the double translation, the text is closer to reconstructing than domesticating translation strategies. And even if Franz Kuhn’s translation is said to be shy and canceling explicit sexual contents many places, it still contains a lot of erotic scenes, mostly presented in highly metaphoric language, with metaphors, however, that are not rooted in the western or Hungarian literary tradition. And it can be also a reason of its popularity: pornography was strictly forbidden in Socialist Hungary, but the demand very probably existed. Some classics of world literature could provide a sort of substitute. Even if the translation was “delphinized” (transformed *ad usum delphini*; for the use of the Dauphin or the youth in general), the highly metaphorical erotic language may have freed the readers’ phantasy. Some works of Classical Antiquity, as well as oriental textbooks of sexuality (the *Kama Sutra* and *The Perfumed Garden* by Nefzawi) were also published in astonishingly many editions. The canonized position of those texts, and the fact that they were written in old times in different cultures, made them acceptable



for the authorities, while they were still suitable for not so canonical reading practices too.

I have already mentioned that the last two decades show the interest in classical Chinese novels in decline. I have also to mention that the two recent Nobel-prize winners of China have only a marginal presence in the Hungarian book market. Only one book by Gao Xingjian is available, the *Soul Mountain* [18]. No book by Mo Yan has been published in Hungary before 2013, but now *The Republic of Wine* is available in the translation of Éva Kalmár [19], born in 1938, whose career has been more closely tied to the publishing industry than to the academic sphere. What I hope, however, is that a new generation of Chinese translators in Hungary will rise. Approximately 30000 Chinese people immigrated to Hungary around 1990, when for a couple of months they were already allowed to leave China and still did not need a visa to enter Hungary. Their children, the first generation of Chino-Hungarians born in Hungary and educated in a bilingual environment, are about to leave the universities now.

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## 新书架

《海外中国现代文学研究文选》，孔海立、王尧选编，  
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本书为“苏州大学海外汉学研究丛书”之一，选编了夏志清、普实克 (Jaroslav Prusek)、李欧梵、韩南 (Patrick Hanan)、王德威、安敏成 (Marston Anderson)、金介甫 (Jeffrey C. Kinkley) 和葛浩文 (Howard Goldblatt) 的英文论文 8 篇，皆为在海外中国现代文学研究领域具有重要影响的名作，虽“不一定能全面涵盖和体现西方中国现代文学研究的全貌和特色”，但“均致力于细致的文本解读和详实的历史描述，不玩弄理论的花枪，也不追逐概念的光鲜，这正是使中国现代文学研究在西方学界得以建立的根基”。书末还附有《海外中国现代文学研究推荐阅读书目》，收录了自 1990 年至 2011 年出版的该领域代表性著作 23 部，供读者进一步阅读参考。

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